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RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 9736
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S E C R E T BOGOTA 010214

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/16/2016
TAGS: PROG PREL PTER CO
SUBJECT: ARAUCA AND CATATUMBO: 3 KEYS TO SECURITY

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) Security in Arauca department is much improved, with no pipeline attacks this year and the population increasingly cooperating with the COLMIL. Three keys to this progress are U.S.-funded helicopters for combat air mobility, judicial processes against militias relying on out-of-town prosecutors, and U.S.-aided intelligence centers. Despite this progress, the ELN and FARC retain military capacity in Arauca. Further down the pipeline in the Catatumbo region (N. Santander), the COLAR has generated impressive results combating a heavier FARC and ELN threat, but it is at only the early stages of replicating the territorial gains achieved in Arauca. End Summary.

ARAUCA: Pipeline and Populace More Secure

¶12. (C) Security in Arauca is much improved. No attacks have occurred this year on the Arauca stretch of the Cano-Limon oil pipeline, compared to a peak of 127 in 2001, and electrical tower bombings (which also halt production) have declined. Transport is now secure from the mines, attacks, road blocks, and extortion tolls that once made highways impassable. About 70 percent of the 18th Brigade's force strength is dedicated to holding territory, including a specialized battalion for protecting energy installations. The 18th Brigade stresses above all that its relations with the public have turned around "180 degrees," with contact no longer impeded by locals' fear of FARC or ELN reprisal.

KEY #1: Air Mobility for Combat

¶13. (C) Progress against ELN and FARC dates back to 2002. The turning point, says Occidental's security chief, came when the 18th Brigade "left its garrisons" and went on the offensive. Key to that change, says COL Ricardo Gomez, were U.S.-funded helicopters. Air transport was critical not only for quick reaction to intelligence, but also for insertion of forces directly on enemy targets, evading ubiquitous militia who would have alerted guerrilla fighters to COLAR movements overland. The FARC used to show off its comprehensive surveillance in a nightly radio broadcast detailing positions of area COLAR units. The guerrillas now avoid engagement and

have retreated to remote areas, including across the border with Venezuela.

KEY #2: Militia Arrests and Trials; the EDAs

¶4. (C) With the guerrillas now lying low, COLMIL emphasis has shifted from hard combat against armed fighters in the field to 'soft' legal action against militias who are the guerrillas' protective 'eyes and ears.' The COLMIL depends on civil law enforcement investigators to gather the evidence and issue arrest warrants. In this process, deserters and informant networks are primary sources of information. Psyops campaigns over radio and by community outreach encourage informants to come forth. The result is an arrest rate that exceeds combat kills (137 vs. 19 in an ongoing operation).

¶5. (C) The judicial war hinges on an innovative new tool of the Prosecutor General (Fiscalia), the so-called Support Team (Equipo de Apoyo, or EDA). This is a group of specialized anti-terrorist investigators and prosecutors from Bogota, rotated into Arauca on temporary duty and housed on the military base. Prior to the EDA's creation in 2002, there had been no arrests for terrorist action in Arauca for 20 years due to pervasive guerrilla influence and intimidation, says Occidental's security chief. In the latter's view, "judicialization is the key to winning this war." Both the arrest rate and related decline in attacks are measures of the EDA's success. There are now five EDAs nationally, in zones of highest violence. DoJ aims to support the Fiscalia in further expanding the program.

KEY #3: Intelligence Centers

¶6. (S) Intelligence is at the heart of both military and judicial strategies. The COLMIL has established intelligence centers in three main conflict zones of Arauca, including a U.S.-administered joint unit (COLAR, COLAF, COLMAR) assisted by a newly arrived U.S. intelligence officer on temporary duty. The intelligence hubs serve three functions:

- information collection on enemy fighter positions, as a basis for offensive combat operations;
- collection of profiles of militia members -- including photos, documents, and deserter debriefs -- for assembling arrest warrant dossiers; and
- a counterterrorism effort to fuel feuding between FARC and ELN.

FARC's "War" on ELN

¶7. (C) Despite clear COLMIL gains in Arauca, FARC-ELN fighting remains a significant story. The two terrorist groups avoid direct contact with the COLMIL and battle for territory, mobility corridors and access to the Venezuela border, coca crops, pipeline royalties, and other extortion revenues. Arauca is a traditional ELN stronghold the FARC has vowed to take over, issuing an ultimatum in October 2004 that the ELN be subsumed into the FARC or eliminated; combats increased after an ELN leader killed a FARC commander last December. As the weaker of the two, the ELN is reported to have sought mediation to end the feud, but the FARC's declaration of war is still in effect. Expanses of unpopulated and/or dense terrain offer space for the FARC and ELN to hide out and to carry on their feud.

CATATUMBO: Early Efforts to Confront Guerrilla Dominion

¶ 8. (C) Catatumbo provides a striking contrast to Arauca: there have been 17 attacks this year on this stage of the pipeline and more on electrical towers. Compared to Arauca's flat savannah, Catatumbo's hilly jungle makes repairs difficult. The FARC and ELN still have dominion over much of the region. The COLMIL is only beginning to mobilize: the Division headquarters has moved forward into the region to drive commanders harder, and 30th Brigade has moved to the Venezuela border nearer the locus of attacks. The Division has concentrated offensive elements in the area: a new mobile brigade (BRIM) was formed in January, two battalions were seconded, and the Division's elite rapid response unit (FURED) is deployed. Aggressive combats supported by a loan of Arauca's helicopters yielded 24 FARC kills and 59 captures in a recent week.

¶ 9. (C) Further steps are needed to replicate in Catatumbo the success seen in Arauca. An application is pending for DoD funding for equipment and training. The 30th Brigade is newly vetted, and a U.S. MilGroup planning and assistance training team (PATT) has just arrived. Psyops and civil affairs programs are not yet well organized, an important area where PATT guidance will help. An EDA has been created but is not yet staffed from outside the area, hampering its independence. Above all, the guerrillas are well dispersed throughout the vast and heavily forested region, which COLAR troops have barely penetrated past the pipeline.

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